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ABSTRACT

The contact zones in teaching writing are connected in multiple ways. A principal concern is how students learn to write for the disciplines, but the focus is the relationship between composition specialists and their colleagues throughout the disciplines. In the early days of writing across the curriculum (WAC), writing was seen primarily as a mode of expression and a way to encourage critical thinking. English departments held workshops for colleagues from other disciplines and those faculty members then gave students write-to-learn assignments ranging from journals to response papers. The second stage of WAC acknowledges the different discourse communities in the university and designing writing programs--writing in the disciplines (WID). WID courses teach majors to read, write, and think in specific disciplines and makes students more flexible writers. WID can be taught in the composition class, using WAC Readers, which contain model texts and explanatory apparatus, or the WID texts with only discipline-specific texts, enabling instructors trained only in English literature to teach outside their fields. Or members of other disciplines can teach English composition instructors how to teach writing appropriate to their fields. Learning to master different styles of writing directly relevant to their academic lives allows students to think of themselves as academic writers. (CR)

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Shaping the Contact Zone: Designing WAC/WID Assignments for Composition courses.

Sandra Jamieson.

Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Milwaukee, March 1996.

At one of those 2 am moments that I like to call "prewriting" rather than "insomnia" I decided that I should have subtitled this paper "what's a girl to do?" The mix of plaintive whine and false humor in that question really does capture the feeling of helplessness that is one of the products of the various contact zones in our lives--a reaction that is part of the asymmetrical power structure of those contact zones that of necessity makes us feel we have fewer options than we really do. The particular contact zones I will discuss here are multipally connected. My concern is how students learn to write for the disciplines, but my focus is the relationship between composition specialists and our colleagues throughout the disciplines--a relationship in which the power shifts in fascinating ways depending on the question being asked.

As writing across the curriculum theory and practice moves further from what Bazerman calls its "first stage" and into what I prefer to call writing in the disciplines, teachers of first year composition courses are faced with some major pedagogical dilemmas.

• If it is true that writing is a collaborative social act [Bruffee], that "human language can be understood only from the perspective of a society" [Faigley], and that each discipline represents a discourse community with its own methodology and world view [Bizzell],

then the first-year composition course taught by professors & adjuncts from the English department might not be as helpful to our students as some of us would like to believe.

• If it is true that at the heart of each discipline there is a set of "philosophical and methodological assumptions that determine what. . . will [be] consider[ed] acceptable or unacceptable reasoning, presenting of evidence, and inferring [Rose],

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then the attempts of first-year composition instructors to teach universal principles and rules of writing that apply in all situations could actually be doing more harm than good.

• If it is more appropriate to think of discourse communities as "contact zones" [Pratt] where two cultures--speakers of the discourse's language and non speakers, for example--encounter each other unequally and in an asymmetrical power relation that forces transculturation,

then maybe any attempts to teach general "academic writing" in composition classes mystifies that power relation and makes it harder for our students to see what is demanded of them in their other college courses--and what its consequences are.

• If she believes that these things are true, what is the administrator of one of those first-year composition programs to do? And how can she do it?

In the early days of writing across the curriculum, what Bazerman calls the first stage, writing was seen primarily as a mode of expression and a way to encourage critical thinking. Universities and colleges held workshops and seminars in which members of the English department shared their wisdom and sense of the centrality of writing with their colleagues from other disciplines to encourage them to incorporate writing into their classes rather than simply assigning research papers at the end. As a result, it became popular for faculty from across the curriculum to include write-to-learn assignments ranging from journals to response papers. Many participants of these WAC workshops praised them for the sense of community that developed in them and the collaborative projects that ensued; it is stimulating to join one's colleagues to do intellectual work instead of the endless committees that are generally our only meeting grounds. We are often excited to get the opportunity to work together--and this might be one of the biggest lessons we have learned from WAC. However, while that intellectual work was very productive, in most cases participants had to minimize or ignore the sometimes huge epistemological differences at the heart of their disciplines.

While all generalizations are likely to be regretted, we can generalize about some of the ways WAC was delivered to students.

In programs where all of the writing instruction occurred across the curriculum and first-year composition was not taught in the English department, that writing instruction tended to draw on expressive writing theories and focus on general skills such as organization and style rather than discipline-specific skills.

Where WAC occurred in writing intensive courses in addition to first-year composition, the latter still tended to teach skills believed to be directly transferable--like the four modes, freewriting, or general prewriting and revision strategies. Or else they reverted to Lit. & Comp. with little or no acknowledgment that this, too, is a discipline-specific course teaching discipline-specific skills, many of which are not appropriate in other disciplines.

Students and teachers learned and continue to learn a tremendous amount from WAC. But the models described above leave the students who most need help "inventing the university" still unable to achieve the acculturation demanded of them as they move deeper into the contact zones of their major fields. For many of our students, the problem is not knowing what they mean or freeing up their ideas, but knowing how to say what they mean in a manner acceptable to the academy, and, knowing how to ask the questions at the heart of the discipline under consideration. Teaching them general writing skills is not enough. As David Russell puts it,

> in the absence of conscious, discipline-specific writing instruction, students whose language backgrounds allowed them to learn the discourse of a discipline without such instruction were more likely to enter successfully the professions associated with it; those students whose backgrounds made conscious, discipline-specific language instruction necessary were much less likely to succeed (53).

What is known as the second stage of WAC recognizes this problem and seeks to address it by acknowledging the different discourse communities in the university and designing writing programs that help students to do that too. I prefer to call such programs Writing in the Disciplines, or WID, because both approaches exist simultaneously in American colleges rather than there being a natural progression from one to the other as the name implies. Proponents of

WID believe that writers are socially constructed and that disciplines are contact zones whose language, customs, and basic assumptions must be internalized before fledgling members will be accepted.

WID courses teach majors to read, write, and think in specific disciplines. Lower-level courses replace most of the general expressivist writing-as-a-mode-of-learning assignments with discipline-specific writing such as literature reviews, and staged assignments in which students can learn what is expected at each stage of a developing research project or paper. Such assignments make students aware of the conventions and expectations of a discipline, and introduce them to its culture. Students who take several WID classes become more flexible writers. And this, in turn, makes them more able to move from the foothills of one discipline to those of the next because they understand that questions are asked and answered differently in each discipline and they can therefore adjust their writing as they learn the new questions and answers rather than trying to fit them into "universal" models taught to them in their English classes. In successful WID programs students "encounter the discipline's texts," "incorporate" those texts into their own work, and learn to "frame their knowledge within the myriad conventions that help define a discipline" as Mike Rose argues they should, ultimately allowing them to "persuad[e] . . . other investigators that [their] knowledge is legitimate." That is, to speak as fledgling members of the contact zone, and be heard by established members.

But what happens to the first-year composition program in this scenario? Is there room, or need, for general writing instruction alongside a fully developed WID program? Many administrators would like to answer "no" and so trim their budgets sizably. But that's another paper.

What keeps me awake is another question. If one believes that writing should be taught in the context of the disciplines in which it will be used, what is one to do if one finds oneself on a campus in which the only systematic writing instruction occurs in first-year, English department-based composition classes?

Solution #1

Aside from the less than helpful "find another job" and "try to build a WID program," the first obvious response is "try to teach WID in the composition class." And this response has led to the many WAC Readers now on the market. Composition readers, with their model texts and explanatory apparatus, allow instructors trained only in English literature to present and teach material and skills from outside of their field--whether that "outside" is composition, cultural studies, or the social sciences. In some form or other, composition readers have been embraced as the way to teach principles of writing while also providing examples to be imitated since at least the fifteenth century. And, as I have argued elsewhere, since that time they have always also served to facilitate enculturation. By addressing a particular reading-subject, and calling into being a specific writing-subject, composition readers have been interpellating ideologically specific students since their inception. And if such texts can serve the status quo when used uncritically in regular composition classes, why not use them to deliberately help our students learn to enculturate themselves into the various academic disciplines?

WAC Readers tend to be divided into broad categories such as "Natural Sciences," "Social Sciences," and "Humanities," or "Liberal Arts," and then, sometimes, further subdivided into disciplines. However, the materials included under those headings may come as some surprise. As Kristine Hansen has shown, the texts we find there are not written by or for scholars of the discipline, nor are they even similar to texts students might expect to read in courses in that discipline. Instead, we find Richard Rodriguez under social sciences because he discusses race, even though his background is in English, or Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a Dream" as an example of Political Science Writing. These particular examples come from a text called *Patterns Across the Disciplines*, but these patterns are repeated in almost all WAC texts whether they claim to cross the disciplines or the curriculum. At worst, contemporary WAC readers simply offer repackaged canonical essays such as Virginia Woolf's "Professions for Women" and Maxine Hong Kingston's' "Girlhood Among Ghosts" --both to be found listed as social science writing. In the latter case this is particularly problematic as we can only assume it

is there because the world Hong Kingston describes would be the subject of social science--the chapter from her autobiographical novel is not even slightly ethnographic, and it is certainly not written in any style appropriate to the social sciences. Such a message reinforces stereotypes about who conducts social science research and who is the subject of that research while at the same time failing to teach any useful discipline-specific skills!

Under "Science and Mathematics" we tend to find pieces on scientific matters, maybe even by scientists such as Stephen Jay Gould, but written for the popular press rather than for an academic audience.

Whatever "model texts" they include, both WAC and WID readers follow them with questions and writing assignments that do not point to the discipline specific nature of the thinking and language use in the piece--or the lack thereof. If there are introductions to sections, they fail to comment in sufficient detail on the contextual differences and varied conventions of different discourse communities, implying by this that the *only* differences are in content. The essays thus conform to the kind of reading students *imagine* will be assigned in other disciplines because of their subject matter, and the assignments call for responses written in the language of "freshman English" for a lay audience of what Kinneavy calls "politicians and consumers" ("WAC" 371) rather than the kinds of writing that will be required of them as they address the real subject matter of the discipline. Moreover, like many of their non-WAC counterparts, the over-riding concern of many WAC texts seems to be to create "good citizens" rather than good students. The topics are selected to meet social agendas--to have the students see that they are "free beings capable of behaving according to their own choices and controlling their own lives" [D&D], to make them culturally sensitive and environmentally concerned, skeptical of science-as-truth, and so on. While these are for the most part important issues, and while the "good citizen" approach is a laudable goal that is as old as education itself, such an agenda tends to conflict with and undercut the WID agenda.

Composition instructors who adopt WAC texts to compensate for a lack of WID courses at their colleges should be disappointed in the options available. If they remember how WAC

developed from English departments out to the rest of the academy, though, they should not be so surprised. Many WAC texts, especially Behrens' and Rosen's *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*, teach excellent reading, writing, and thinking skills--but they don't come close to teaching WID skills. These readers do not prepare students for discipline-specific academic writing any more than do traditional readers, and perhaps less so because they are misleading. Russell observes that promoters of WAC "claimed it would assimilate . . . previously excluded students by means of language instruction" (62). However, if, as in these cases, it is simply preparing students to write for a lay audience, it will not grant them access to the discourse communities of the academy at all. Nor will it give them any indication of how discourse communities work.

So, what is a girl to do?

Solution #2

There are some WID texts available these days, most notable Feldman's *Writing and Learning in the Disciplines* and, to some extent, Kiniry and Rose's *Critical Strategies for Academic Thinking and Writing* which uses some discipline-specific texts, but without real comment. Feldman employs guides from each discipline to help her read the discipline-specific texts she includes and to explain what it means to be a member of that discipline. This text, then, tries to teach WID--and although I haven't used it in the classroom, I think it probably succeeds. Other books like this will follow, and adopting them is a solution to the problem of how to teach WID in a composition class. Essentially, the authors are teaching instructors and students simultaneously, and while composition teachers can't grade the writing assignments in the same way as members of the disciplines would, they are preparing students to develop academic writing skills for a variety of contexts and audiences, and Feldman even introduces students to the concept that each discipline pursues different questions in different, but very particular, ways.

So, it seems that in the future at least, textbooks will be more likely to provide one solution to the problem I have identified. And they may well help our students deal with the contact zones of the academy. However, they do this without the benefit of the connection between faculty so valued by participants of WAC workshops. They do not help us to decrease the intellectual alienation between disciplines and they ask very little of composition teachers or our colleagues across campus. They may help our students overcome the asymmetry of the contact zone, but they allow us to remain safely within our discipline rather than demanding that we, too, truly explore the ways in which meaning and knowledge are created through the academic discourse we purport to teach.

Solution #3

There is, I believe, another option that allows composition teachers to participate more actively in the generation of knowledge about college-level literacy. In an ironic reversal of the WAC workshop where the English department shares its wisdom and knowledge with colleagues from throughout the college, in the WID model I am proposing, English department-based composition instructors become the students. In this model, members of the academic disciplines teach us how to teach writing that will be appropriate to their fields. Then they help us to select readings and develop writing assignments that will help our students get a sense of what it means to read, think, and write in a particular discipline.

Grant money is scarce these days, so most such conversations will probably occur over lunch or coffee. They need to take place over several meetings, and they will not be easy. First of all, no matter how well we know our colleagues socially and institutionally, revealing their intellectual workings to someone from another discipline is quite a challenge. In my experience, the people I think I can work with turn out to be the people I can work with, and they are always curious about my project. Suspicious, very skeptical, but curious. I tend to begin by asking which one thing they wish we would stop teaching people about writing over there in English--"what do you have to unteach them before they can write for your discipline?" is a good one.

"What do you wish we would teach them?" is another. The killer is "what would you say is the major role of writing in your discipline?" The real disciplinary differences start showing when you ask how and when they use the present and the past tense. And you'll need to take notes--you are the student here. Pause, ask more questions. Sometimes amazing things happen. A chemist I worked with suddenly stopped midway through explaining what seemed to me to be a pretty straightforward structure for research reports. "Wait!" she exclaimed "Did you notice that? I just used the present tense when I described that part of the research and the past tense when I talked about this part. We do shift between tenses. I never realized before. It makes sense." Then she paused. "Is this the kind of thing you wanted to find out?" Oh yes. Sometimes the person you are talking to learns a whole lot more than you do--but don't let on!

Sometimes you will encounter the kind of differences that our students face every day. I spent over half an hour of utter hell with that same chemistry professor as we tried to think about what my students could read to help them understand the kinds of writing that might be required of them in a chemistry class. The problem was the "review article." We thought we were both talking about the same thing. But I was imagining something like a book review. Clearly a secondary source. While she was talking about a primary source. A report of a laboratory finding. Our collaboration would have ended there and then if we hadn't still had to finish eating lunch. Finally I said "when you use the term review article, what do you mean? What does a chemistry review article look like?" And we were back on track.

What was sad about that particular session was that she kept saying how amazing it was that I wanted to know about chemistry writing. English department people teach students never to use the passive voice--they don't ever consider that other people might be right about how to use language in certain contexts. Economists, Mathematicians, Biologists, Psychologists, Sociologists, and historians have had similar reactions. But how much they have to teach us! In this learning process, I have also attended labs and learned to draw a supply and demand curve. I have entered the contact zone with my students, and come out the other side much more able to teach academic writing--and I've made some new friends.

A scaled down version of this strategy would be to ask colleagues to take a look at WID textbooks like Feldman's and evaluate them for you. You might ask them to suggest additional readings or provide expanded explanations, or you might just ask whether the material seems helpful. As other truly WID texts become available you might repeat the conversation. From small beginnings larger projects grow, but even if you simply introduce the material by telling your students that you talked with so and so in the such and such department about this material, you will have helped them see that all academic writing has a context and a purpose, and that purpose is deeply embedded in specific disciplinary contexts.

At the undergraduate level many colleges do not require papers in all classes. A student could earn a Bachelor's degree from many American colleges without writing any papers at all outside of her composition class. However, it would seem that these students need to understand how the various disciplines function more urgently than those who have at least tried to write papers in a number of disciplines. If we do not give our students some idea of what is at stake in the academy--what we do, and why we do it--we really will be practicing a "system of exclusion," and we won't be preparing the students for the real writing required of them in college and the workplace: writing dependent on flexible ~~reposes~~ responses to specific contexts, audiences, and demands. The students "on the margins" of the academy that Bartholomae, Rose, and Shaughnessy describe gain much more from composition classes if they are treated seriously as "apprentice academics" and invited to "try out" the language of the academy in its various forms. However, demanding that they do so without being prepared to take the risks ourselves--and experience the frustration and pain of the asymmetrical relationship that dominates any learning of a new discourse, and the joy--seems more than a little hypocritical. A WID course that draws on the knowledge of those colleagues who will be teaching our composition students as they move across the campus seems so much more helpful than the isolated composition course with its textbooks and equally isolated students. Although the students would not end the course "fluent" in any disciplinary language, they would have been empowered to decide for themselves which discourse best addresses their concerns and, to some

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extent at least, they would then be prepared to enter that discipline. Learning to "master" (or simply recognize) different styles of writing directly relevant to their academic lives tends also to make students become more confident writers. Most important, being addressed as academic writers by the texts they read--texts written by and for academics-- allows students to think of themselves as academic writers, and thus produces a much more egalitarian class than any other composition strategy I know of.

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